

***Who Is Christ For Us? A Priest***  
**A Sermon on Hebrews 4:14-5:10**  
**Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 10, 2019**

## **Introduction**

I have never preached on Hebrews before. Some things in it put me off. The blood of Christ is everywhere. Our worship team doesn't like to preach or sing about blood. [Black churches aren't afraid of blood; the cross is all about the blood.] There is the image of Christ as a once and for all sacrifice for sins. People today can't hear that without thinking of substitutionary atonement, which is not what the author of Hebrews intends. It comes about 1,000 years later in Christian tradition. There is the image of Jesus as passing through the heavens to sit at the right hand of God. These are examples of high christology in Hebrews that don't fit well with contemporary theologies or with our materialist understanding of reality.

I think we have gone too far in emptying Jesus of transcendence. What attracts me about Hebrews is the image of Jesus as high priest. Hebrews is the only book in the New Testament that offers us this image.

We have been talking for the last two weeks about Jesus as the Anointed One: prophet, king and priest, the three offices that were anointed by God. We are used to calling Jesus a prophet and a king, but priest is a new image. Ironically, in the first century, the days were long past when Israel had prophets or kings. The priest was the people's connection with God.

## **First Move: Ancient Israel's Culture Map**

In the days of the patriarchs, the head of the family built altars and offered sacrifices to God. The sacrifice was thought of as a way of sharing a meal with God. It was a means of expressing thanks to God for the blessings that he brought on the patriarchs. Abraham built altars at Bethel [Gen 12:8 and 13:4] and Shechem [Gen 12:6-7 and 13:4]. Jacob built altars at Beersheba [Gen 26:25], Shechem [Gen 33:20] and Bethel [Gen 35:7].

The first priest to be anointed was Aaron. At the burning bush Yahweh commands Moses to go and assemble the elders of Israel and tell them that Yahweh will deliver them from their misery in Egypt and take them to a land of milk and honey. Moses complains that he is slow of speech and slow of tongue. Yahweh tells

Moses to take his brother Aaron and let him speak to the elders. Later, at Sinai, God commands Moses to anoint Aaron and his sons as priests [Exod 28:41].

Priests offered sacrifices to Yahweh on behalf of the people. Priests have gotten a bad rap from Christians. They have been stereotyped over the centuries as being legalistic and being more concerned about ritual than righteous behavior. The stereotyping by followers of Christ began in the gospels. The Pharisees wanted to extend the rules on cleanliness to all the people of Israel in the first century. They wanted all of Israel to be a nation of priests. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus pronounces a series of Woes the scribes and Pharisees, calling them hypocrites. Christians have misinterpreted Paul as wanting to abolish the Law.

An obstacle to understanding the role of priests is that we don't understand the culture map of ancient Israel. Richard Nelson, an Old Testament scholar at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, says that all human beings structure their world through a culture map. Reality is too complex to make sense of unless we view it through a lens that helps discriminate among all the data that we receive. Most people are binary thinkers, dividing reality, space and time into pairs of opposites: hot/cold, darkness/light, male/female, good/evil, friend/stranger.

Our friend, Richard Rohr, tells us that we move past binary thinking as we progress on our spiritual journey. The mystics reach the deepest spiritual state, unitive consciousness, in which they experience true union with God and are filled with peace, wholeness, acceptance, surrender and prayer. Most people don't get there. They remain stuck in binary or dualistic thinking. That is what culture maps are for, to define the binary pairs that are most influential for that culture.

The two fundamental distinctions on ancient Israel's culture map were clean/unclean and holy/profane. Most Christians have a shallow understanding of these pairs. They think of clean/unclean as meaning clean/dirty or sanitary/unsanitary.

Richard Nelson points out that to be clean was to be in its proper place, within the boundaries set by God at creation. It conforms to God's work in creation of dividing and separating. Something that is unclean is out of place. It may be better for us to translate this word pair as orderly/disorderly or orderly/chaotic. Meat from domestic animals was clean; meat from wild animals was unclean. Fish with scales and fins were clean and orderly; water creatures without scales were unclean. Wholeness was clean; gashes in the flesh were unclean. Dead bodies were thought to be still in the process of crossing the boundary between life and death.

Holy and profane is the other binary pair on the culture map. Most Christians also misunderstand this distinction. The profane is simply what is common—it is not a derogatory label. The holy is in the realm of the divine. Places, times, people and

objects could all be holy. Holiness was dangerous; the power within the holy was like high-voltage electricity. The holy had to be separated from the profane or else the profane could be incinerated or the holy desecrated. Think of Lot's wife looking back on the destruction in Sodom and turning to a pillar of salt. Fear and awe were the proper responses to this type of power.

Priests were responsible for maintaining these boundaries. They studied the Torah to learn the boundaries, and they taught them to the people.

Priests were mediators between God and the people. Priests had to be clean and holy to approach the altar in the Temple, bearing sacrifices on behalf of the people that bring to Yahweh. The gifts would purify the people of sin and uncleanness. The priests connected people with God.

## **Second Move: The Culture Map in Hebrews**

The author of Hebrews speaks of Jesus as a prophet, a king and a priest. He begins the letter by saying that, "Long ago, God spoke to the fathers by the prophets, but at the end of these days, he speaks to us by the Son." [Heb 1:1-2.] Jesus as the Son speaks as the prophets spoke long ago. Son is a synonym for king. Psalm 2 is a royal psalm that may have been used on the occasion of the coronation of kings: "You are my son; today I have begotten you."

The author in today's text tells his community that Jesus is also a great high priest. This is a new kind of high priest: he has passed through the heavens and made purification for our sins. Now he is sitting at the right hand of God.

The author is introducing eschatology. Instead of passing through the Temple to reach the Holy of Holies, Jesus passes through the heavens to reach God in the heavenly sanctuary.

The author is working off a new culture map. In the first century Jewish thought was heavily influenced by eschatology and Hellenism. The divide between the eternal and the temporal, the spirit and matter/flesh were now the dominant pairs on the map.

Jesus has inaugurated the new age by passing through the heavens. He is the ideal mediator because he was tested in the flesh, as the people in the author's community were, and he now lives in the realm of spirit, at the right hand of God.

The author encourages his community to hold fast to their confession, apparently the confession was simply that Jesus is the son of God. It also may have been a creed about Jesus passing through the heavens.

The author encourages his community to approach the throne of grace with confidence. They do not have to worry that they will be incinerated if they approach

too close to the throne. Jesus has prepared the way for them, purifying them of their sins by sacrificing his own life for them. At the throne they will be met by mercy and grace.

The author describes the role of the human high priest, which was always a male. In the patriarchal language of the day, the text says, “Every high priest has been chosen from men on behalf of men.” The high priest is chosen to represent men before God, offering both gifts and sacrifices for sins. The purpose of the gifts and sacrifices is to purify the people so that they may be cleansed of their sins. This restores God’s intent at creation, when God created man and woman on the sixth day and declared that it was very good.

The high priest moderates his feelings toward those who are ignorant and those who have been misled or deceived. The high priest is shielding the people from the wrath of God; he responds to their sins by moderating his feelings instead of getting angry. The author also is making a distinction between intentional and unintentional sins. Sin offerings were for unintentional sins, for people who did know the law or did not know that they had violated the law. Intentional sins were more serious and could result in expulsion from the community.

The high priest is a fitting representative for people because he also is subject to human weakness and must offer gifts and sacrifices on behalf of himself.

The last few verses of today’s text describe the role of Jesus as the eschatological high priest.

Just as the line of human high priests began with Aaron, who was called by God, Jesus was chosen by God to be a priest in the new age. People would have asked how Jesus could be a high priest since he was not descended from Aaron. They knew the tradition that Jesus was descended from David, who was from the line of Judah. The author says that Jesus is a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek was the mysterious high priest of Salem who appeared to Abraham in Genesis 14. He blessed Abraham, and Abraham gave him a tithe of everything he had captured in battle in freeing Lot from captivity. The author is drawing on Psalm 110, another royal psalm, in which God tells the king, “You are a priest forever [or into the age], according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Jesus offered prayers and supplications to God in the flesh and learned obedience from what he suffered. The author suggests that Jesus grew into his role as the son of God. Suffering is the inevitable result of submitting one’s own will to the will of God. Jesus thus becomes “a source of salvation of the age to all the ones who obey.”

### **Third Move: Today's Culture Map**

We have a different culture map today. Western culture, especially young people, seems to have given up on transcendence. There is a crisis of meaning. It is almost as if Western culture has flipped the Hellenistic values: the material is seen as more real than the eternal or the spiritual. There is a spiritual hole in people. We have lost a shared vision. The vision of previous eras is now seen as a vision that was imposed on the culture by white men, colonialists and capitalists. A unified culture has broken into identity groups. We celebrate diversity and the different life experiences of different cultural groups, but we struggle to find common purpose.

The model of Jesus as high priest still addresses our culture. Jesus is our mediator, representing humanity to God and representing God to humanity. Douglas John Hall, a leading theologian of the last generation, says that Jesus identifies with the crisis of meaning that is the dominant problem in white mainline Christians in the United States and Canada. We look with despair at the injustice and incivility around us; we question whether our institutions and the people in our culture have been corrupted by the powers.

Jesus in Gethsemane struggles to find meaning. "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me." In Luke's story, Jesus prays in agony, with sweat pouring down like drops of blood. In Mark's story, Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus stands in solidarity with us in our despair.

Jesus also is an ideal mediator for us with God. People today don't know how to pray. We are uncomfortable sitting in silence. God is sometimes seen as unapproachable, inscrutable and mysterious. We are like Peter and the sons of Zebedee, who could not stay awake with Jesus when he went into the garden to pray. It was too intense for them.

Jesus makes an invisible God real to Christians. Jesus reveals to us what God is like.

Jesus helps us endure postmodernity, helping us to celebrate difference while bringing Christians together. We may have different visions of Christ, but we have Christ in common. That gives us a shared language.

Jesus also connects us with the nones and the dones. Young people know and admire Jesus. It is Christians they have a problem with. Everyone has a need for transcendence and a spirituality that extends and deepens them. Everyone has a need for community that loves and accepts and liberates and challenges them. These are basic human needs.

## **Conclusion**

Following Jesus leads us away from sin. If we are truly committed to Jesus, we are no longer tempted to pursue our selfish desires. We no longer seek to dominate people. We lose our aggression. We become holy as God is holy. We become part of a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. We become a priestly people, disciples of the great high priest.

Jesus fills our lives with meaning, giving up a higher purpose. No matter which culture map you use.

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